Cocoon: great idea, poor execution

You've just put in three hours on the spreadsheet program, and you're ready to put your results into your monthly report. But in an instant, your hard work is extinguished by a power outage, a computer crash or simply hitting the wrong key.

Daybreak Technologies' Cocoon may relieve some of the panic associated with crashing computers and lost files. However, it has some design flaws that make it suitable for only a very narrow range of users.

The program operates on the simple premise of recording every keystroke — from the time you start an application to the time you finish — in a special disk file.

With this program installed and supposedly recording every move, the loss associated with keyboard lock-up could become obsolete. In theory, after your system returns, you would simply recall the Cocoon file from your hard disk, and

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with a little editing, reconstruct your file.

Unfortunately, the program has some limitations that make it impractical for some users.

■ First, because it is RAM-resident, Cocoon can't record the keystrokes you make while you're using another RAM-resident program, such as Prodex or Sidekick.

Because more and more people are using memory-resident programs to look up phone numbers, consult calendars and take notes, this is a fatal flaw.

■ Cocoon's usefulness is limited to single, IBM-compatible PCs with hard disks. Owners of floppy-only machines and networks of

PCs can't use the program.

■ If you use Cocoon every time you call up your word-processing program or spreadsheet, or you switch an application program on and off often during the day, your data recovery is short-lived. Cocoon overwrites its files every time you start up a program. Thus, if you wanted to recall a file created last week or last month, it would be long gone.

Besides, most quality software has its own backup scheme. A good example is WordPerfect, which can back itself up every five minutes or 10 minutes, or however often you want. Of course, it causes a slight delay every time the program takes a snapshot of your document, but I've never found it bothersome.

Where, then, would Cocoon be most effective? Where people work most of the day in a single computer application that has no built-in backup scheme, where

they find it difficult to remember to save files, and where other RAM-resident programs are not used. Accounting clerks who do hours of data entry might be good candidates.

■ The bottom line: Cocoon's design flaws make it suitable for only a very narrow range of users. If you use one computer with the same program all the time, Cocoon could be helpful. But for people who use more than one program during the day or who depend on other memory-resident programs, it falls short.

Cocoon is available from P.O. Box 5629, 21213B Hawthorne Blvd., Torrance, Calif. 90509; (800) 443-0100. It costs $99.

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